Visions of Hypnosis Future

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Clark Hull’s statement which Kirsch et al (in press) quote that “an increase in suggestibility takes place upon entering the hypnotic trance,” is one few of us would dispute. However, they interpret Hull’s work and that of Hilgard and Tart quite idiosyncratically. Hull thought of hypnosis as a state. When Kirsch et al paraphrase Hull, the “increase in suggestibility” becomes “a relatively small increase” and it gives it an opposite emphasis from Hull’s. Similarly Hilgard and Tart (1966; Hilgard, 1965) did study non-hypnotic experiences related to hypnotic ones—but they did not conclude that hypnosis was synonymous with suggestion.

The Kirsch et al article has a rather idiosyncratic summary of what constituted “hypnosis past”—and of what moving beyond it would consist. Hypnosis began as quite authoritarian. It was indeed often measured by compliance with suggestions such as postural sway to which the Kirsch et al article devotes so much space. But this has evolved. I want to discuss two lines of hypnosis research which don’t fit the model of hypnosis=suggestion: subjective assessment and differentiation of sub-types of hypnotizability.

Other than stage hypnosis, there’s no hypnotic application in which it’s desirable for a person to sway or hold their arm stiff. Clinicians tend to ask clients whether they are hypnotized or where on a continuum they place their state. Researchers gradually adopted these subjective measures for use alongside compliance with suggestions. Kirch et al (in press) allude to the simplest of these when they mention that 32% of Hilgard & Tart’s subjects reported feeling hypnotized after an induction but only 1% felt themselves to be so after non-hypnotic suggestions. Kirch et al don’t explore this enough, however, to arrive at how it contradicts their simple hypnosis=suggestion model. Laurence & Nadon (1986) reviewed the extensive research on subjective measures, including their application.
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to hypnotic vs. non-hypnotic conditions by researchers such as Nicholas Spanos and Theodore Barber. Laurence and Nadon concluded that “hypnotic depth reports are usually significantly higher for S’s who have undergone a hypnotic treatment than for those who have received task-motivation, imagination-control, or relaxation-control instructions” (pp. 217-218). They also concluded that expectancies did not account for most of the difference in specific experience between conditions.

The most elaborate of the subjective scales in the Field Inventory of Hypnotic Depth (Field, 1965) which contains 38 true-false statements that subjects answer following an experience—hypnotic or otherwise. The items address experiences not suggested during the procedure including: “Time stood still,” “The experimenter’s voice seemed to come from very far away,” “Sometimes I did not know where I was,” and “It seemed completely different from ordinary experience.” As with other subjective measures, Field scores are significantly higher for hypnotic induction than non-hypnotic suggestions (Laurence & Nadon, 1986).

The study of different types of hypnotizability is another area which sheds light on the limits of the role of suggestion. When I read Barber and Wilson’s (1991) article on “fantasizer” characteristics of very high hypnotizables, I wondered if their usual requirement that “highs” be able to reenter hypnosis instantly—which has something in common with “no induction” conditions—accounted for the vivid hallucinatory daydreams which they uniformly reported. In a series of studies (Barrett, 1991, 1992, 1996), I compared highs who could enter trance instantly vs. those who took more time and a longer induction but nevertheless scored as high following this. The first subgroup, “fantasizers”—pretty much the same as Barber and Wilson’s subjects, described hypnosis as much like their rich, vivid, and very realistic waking fantasy life. None of the fantasizers experienced unsuggested amnesia, and 5 of 19 failed to produce suggested amnesia. Only 2 of 19 fantasizers described hypnosis as very different from their other experiences. The earliest memories of fantasizers were all identified as occurring before age 3, and before age 2 for 11 of 19.

The second subgroup, whom I termed “dissociaters,” took time to achieve a deep trance, experienced hypnosis as different from any prior experiences, and were more likely to exhibit amnesia for hypnotic experience. None of the dissociaters described their waking imagery as entirely realistic, and the earliest memories in this group were all over the age of 3 (mean age=5). The dissociaters had much higher Field scores than the fantasizers—though even the latter endorsed some items about differences from their normal state. The ability to have various imagery and memory-related experiences without hypnosis seems to play a different role for the two groups. Suggestion without a lengthy induction clearly matches less of the hypnotic effect for the dissociaters than the fantasizers.

None of this is to say that suggestions analogous to those of waking do not play a significant role in hypnosis. Normal suggestibility is indeed underrated as evidenced by the severe restrictions courts impose on testimony following hypnosis compared with their relative disregard of leading questions in nonhypnotic contexts. It’s encouraging that Kirsch et al acknowledge that other factors may play a role in hypnosis and that neurophysiological markers for it may be found. But they ignore much that we already know about this. Their title is probably an allusion to Proust (1941) who dwelled endlessly on the past, but I prefer the metaphor in the similar phrase of Dicken’s (1890) where the spirit of hypnosis past would serve simply to motivate us for hypnosis present and future. The vision of these is clearer than Kirsch et al acknowledge. We already have strong evidence for hypnosis producing subjective states that are different from waking suggestion. We already know that there are factors beyond suggestion influencing hypnotic response. Suggestibility does not equal
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imagination, though Kirsch et al seem to conflate them. Neither is the same as dissociation. All three are traits which influence hypnosis. Already there begin to be neurophysiological findings—such as in the Kosslyn et al (2000) study which they breeze past. Hull had the correct weighting when he described hypnosis’s “increase in suggestibility.” There is nothing to be gained by making this formulation more extreme or more simplistic. It’s more productive to move on to the questions of how and why hypnosis enhances suggestion—and delineating all the other factors which contribute to this fascinating phenomenon.

References


